

**What is hepatitis C?**

Hepatitis C is a viral infection of the liver caused by the hepatitis C virus. Hepatitis C can lead to lifelong (chronic) infection and can cause serious liver damage including cirrhosis and liver cancer.

**Who is at risk for hepatitis C?**

Anyone can get hepatitis C, but those at greater risk include:

- Current and former injection drug users, including those injected only once many years ago
- Recipients of blood transfusions or solid organ transplants before July 1992
- Recipients of clotting factor concentrates made before 1987
- Chronic hemodialysis patients
- Persons with HIV infection
- Children born to HCV-positive mothers
- Health care workers after needlesticks involving HCV-positive blood

Screening guidelines recommend that individuals born between 1945 and 1965 be tested for hepatitis C at least once in their lifetime even if they do not identify a risk factor for acquiring hepatitis C infection.

**What are the symptoms of hepatitis C?**

About 80 percent of people have no signs or symptoms of infection. Symptoms may include tiredness, loss of appetite, nausea, abdominal discomfort, vomiting, dark urine or jaundice (i.e., yellowing of skin or whites of eyes). Some people will recover from their hepatitis C infection and only have a limited acute infection for up to six months. The majority of individuals infected, up to 80 percent, carry the virus in their blood for a lifetime and develop chronic infection. Those who have chronic infection are at increased risk of developing liver cancer and cirrhosis.

**How soon do symptoms appear?**

If symptoms do appear, they generally present two weeks to six months after infection, but usually appear within six to seven weeks.

**How is hepatitis C spread?**

Hepatitis C is spread primarily through large or repeated percutaneous (i.e. passage through the skin) exposures to infectious blood, such as:

- Sharing needles and other drug paraphernalia when injecting drugs
- Needlestick injuries in health care settings
- Birth to an HCV-infected mother
- Sharing personal items contaminated with infectious blood, such as razors or toothbrushes

## **When and for how long is a person able to spread the disease?**

The virus can be found in blood weeks before symptoms appear and generally persist for several months afterward. The majority of individuals infected, up to 80 percent, carry the virus in their blood for a lifetime and develop chronic infection. Chronically infected persons are contagious for their lifetime.

## **How is a person diagnosed?**

A health-care professional can diagnose infected individuals using several blood tests.

## **What is the treatment?**

Antiviral treatment is available for hepatitis C infected individuals. People with chronic hepatitis C should be monitored regularly for signs of liver disease. Even though a person may not have symptoms or feel sick, damage to the liver can still occur. Antiviral medication can be used to treat some people with chronic hepatitis C, although not everyone needs or can benefit from treatment. For many, treatment can be successful and results in the virus no longer being detected. Hepatitis C infected individuals are encouraged to visit with their health-care provider on the available treatment options.

## **Does past infection make a person immune?**

No. Past infection does not provide lifelong immunity. Additionally, a person who has had hepatitis C can contract other hepatitis infections, including hepatitis A and B.

## **Should children or others be excluded from child care, school, work or other activities if they have hepatitis C?**

Children should not be excluded unless otherwise recommended by the health department and/or a health-care professional.

## **What can be done to prevent the spread of hepatitis C?**

People who are infected with hepatitis C should be aware that their blood and other body fluids are potentially infectious. Care should be taken to avoid blood exposure to others by not sharing needles, toothbrushes, razors, or any other objects that may have become contaminated with blood. In addition, infected people cannot donate blood or blood products, including plasma.

## **Additional Information:**

Additional information is available at [www.ndhealth.gov/disease](http://www.ndhealth.gov/disease) or by calling the North Dakota Department of Health at 800.472.2180. **This disease is a reportable condition. As mandated by North Dakota law, any incidence of this disease shall be reported to the North Dakota Department of Health.**

## **Resources:**

American Academy of Pediatrics. [Hepatitis C]. In: Kimberlin DW, Brady MT, Jackson MA, Long SS, eds. *Red Book: 2015 Report of the Committee on Infectious Diseases*. 30<sup>th</sup> ed. Elk Grove Village, IL: American Academy of Pediatrics; 2015: [423-428]